



Washington State Department of Agriculture News Release

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WASHINGTON STATE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
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The dark side of St. Johnswort

OLYMPIA — St. Johnswort may be an anti-depressant and possible weight-loss drug, but it can cause real headaches if you plant it on your property. St. Johnswort is a Class C noxious weed that displaces native vegetation and is toxic to grazing animals.

Cattle, horses, sheep and goats that eat St. Johnswort become sensitive to sunlight. Immediate symptoms may include dermatitis, skin blisters and hair loss. Long-term effects may include loss of appetite, weight loss, blindness and death by starvation. Light-colored animals are most susceptible.

“Animals avoid eating St. Johnswort when possible,” said Dr. Robert Mead, state veterinarian. “However, they may not have a choice if the weed has taken over their grazing area. It may also be mixed with hay, which would be very difficult for the animals to avoid.”

Class C weeds are non-native, invasive species that are widespread in the state. Long-term weed control programs are strictly the option of the local weed boards, depending upon local needs and the feasibility of control.

“In normal amounts, St. Johnswort is considered not harmful to humans,” said Dr. Mead. “Our general physiology is different than cattle or sheep. St. Johnswort has long been used as a treatment for depression and various psychological and neurological disorders.”

St. Johnswort (*Hypericum perforatum*), also known as Klamath weed and goatweed, is a perennial plant that spreads by seed and by creeping stems both above and below ground. The seeds have a gelatinous coating that sticks to legs, hooves, boots, vehicles and other objects

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when the seeds are wet. The seeds fall back to the ground when they dry, allowing the plant to spread to new areas.

“St. Johnswort holds promise as a medicinal plant, but it is also a noxious weed,” said Lisa Lantz, executive secretary of the Washington State Noxious Weed Control Board. “Responsible harvest of wild plants contributes to weed control efforts. However, people need to be aware that this plant has a dark side.”

Commercial farming of St. Johnswort, as well as buying, selling and transporting plants or plant parts requires a permit from the state Department of Agriculture.

St. Johnswort was carried to North America by European colonists. By the 1940s, it had infested several million acres of rangeland in the western U.S. Chemical and biological controls have been moderately successful in reducing infestations, but the species remains a problem in many areas.

For additional information on St. Johnswort, contact your local weed board or Greg Haubrich, weed specialist at the state Department of Agriculture, by phone (509) 576-3039 or by E-mail (ghaubrich@agr.wa.gov).

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Note to editors: For information about noxious weeds call the Noxious Weed Control Board at (253) 872-2318. For information about the effects of noxious weeds on livestock call Dr. Robert Mead at (360) 902-1881.